

Can Your Child's Self Esteem Be Too High?

By

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<https://www.peacefulparenthappykids.com/read/concern-self-esteem-can-your-child-s-self-esteem-be-too-high>

"Unconditionality...a solid core of belief in yourself, an abiding sense that you're competent and worthwhile--even when you screw up or fall short--that creates a more stable form of self-esteem, which, in turn, carries a range of psychological and social advantages."

-Alfie Kohn

High self esteem means we see ourselves as good and capable, that we're "secure" in our value or worthiness. Low self esteem means we see ourselves as not quite good enough, not measuring up.

Every parent wants their children to love themselves, to be confident, happy people. But some parents worry that children can have self esteem that is "too high."

There is no such thing. We cannot see ourselves as too good, too capable, too worthwhile.

The worry these parents are expressing is that their child might have an over-inflated view of his own abilities, or a conviction that he's more important than other people. But that's not self esteem. That's grandiosity, and it derives from insecurity. Low self-esteem can sometimes express itself in self-deprecating behavior, but more often shows up as arrogance or pridefulness, a need to believe that we are better than others. This is a defense against the deep fear that we aren't good enough, so we must constantly measure ourselves against others and come out ahead.

By contrast, people with high self esteem are secure enough in their sense of value that they don't need to compare themselves to others or inflate their abilities: they are more than enough, just exactly as they are.

So if you've heard that kids with high self-esteem act entitled, superior, narcissistic, or full of themselves, that's just not true. Any psychological measure that measures these traits is not measuring self-esteem, but grandiosity, which is the opposite of self-esteem.

Some parents are afraid that a child with high self-esteem will stop trying, whether that's at school or sports or piano. But again, that's a myth. When children love a sport or instrument, or take pleasure in learning, they practice that activity and hone their skills. They don't need to be bribed or badgered or made to feel like they're falling short.

But if we as parents pressure a child to achieve, they often begin to feel they aren't good enough. That feels terrible inside, so we can count on the child developing a defense against that feeling. Maybe they

stop trying. Maybe they become so competitive they need to put others down to feel good about themselves. Or maybe they start exaggerating their accomplishments: *"I made 30 baskets at practice!"*

The cure? Be sure your child knows that they are MORE than enough, exactly as they are.

Communicate that you're confident in their ability to practice and learn and grow and get better at whatever they choose. That growth is exciting, and you share their excitement about their achievements. But those achievements are a natural unfolding, developing from their love of applying themselves to their interests. There is nothing your child could do to make you more proud, to get more love from you. You could never love anyone or anything more than you love them.

So how can you help your child develop high self esteem? There are two components, as I mentioned above -- the sense that you're good, and the sense that you're capable. I'm using "good" in the sense that the child feels that she is of value, regardless of what she does, and regardless of whether she succeeds or fails. I'm using "capable" in the sense that the child feels capable of meeting his needs and achieving his own aspirations. Let's dig more deeply into these.

Step 1: Goodness

The core of self-esteem is "Stable Internal Happiness," a phrase that was coined by Martha Heineman Pieper, the author of Smartlove. Stable Internal Happiness is the secure sense that one is good and capable, and that the world is a good place, despite the inevitable wins and losses that life will present.

While some people have a natural tendency to better moods and more optimism than others, "stable internal happiness" can be fostered in any child with unconditional love. Just telling children we love them is not sufficient to develop healthy self-esteem. The child must **feel** that she's loved unconditionally. What does that kind of parenting look like?

1. Parenting that communicates that this child is appreciated and adored, exactly as they are.

She knows that she inspires your love just by being herself. She doesn't have to prove herself, work a bit harder, be a bit better behaved. It doesn't matter if she wins or loses, succeeds or fails. She knows that you could never love her more or less than you do now.

2. Parenting that is responsive to this unique child's needs and emotions.

Responsiveness to your child's needs is one of the most important predictors to raise a child who feels safe and valued. These parents stay connected even while the child becomes increasingly independent. They accept and affirm all of who the child is, including those messy, challenging, human needs and feelings. All parents encounter times when staying positive regarding a tantrumming toddler, recalcitrant eight year old, or rude preteen can seem almost impossible, and we're tempted to withdraw into anger. But giving a child the cold shoulder doesn't teach her anything positive about how to build a relationship. Worse, it teaches her that your love is conditional on her acting a certain way. As always, when kids are at their least lovable is when they need our love the most. So the key to being responsive is to ask yourself what support your child needs to meet your expectations. Then, give that support.

3. Parenting that stays connected to the child while guiding them.

Punishment always undermines self-esteem. Sure, kids need limits. No, he can't pee on the rug, run around in the restaurant, call his mother a poopyface, hit his brother. But setting those limits with empathy (*"You're mad! Tell me in words. Hitting is never okay."*) helps kids learn to manage their emotions and therefore their behavior. That helps them see themselves as good and capable.

Punishment, by comparison, does not help kids learn to manage their emotions, it just worsens the tangle of angry feelings they already can't control and makes them feel like bad people who can't even manage themselves, much less the world. Children experience punishment as a parent intentionally hurting them, either physically or emotionally. No matter what a parent tells the child, punishment doesn't make the child feel loved. And on some level, they interpret that experience as evidence that they aren't good enough to cause their parent to love them.

4. Parenting that gives lots of unconditional positive encouragement.

Affirmation, encouragement and acknowledgment are essential for children to feel seen, heard, respected, appreciated, and valued -- all part of developing healthy self esteem. This does NOT mean praising a child for traits or abilities she doesn't have. In fact, praise for specific traits, as opposed to specific behavior, seems to undermine self esteem. So, for instance, telling a child he's smart pressures him to always be smart, which is impossible for him to pull off, so it makes him insecure. By contrast, acknowledging that a child has figured something out by himself reinforces his sense of himself as someone who is smart and capable enough to figure things out. (What to Say Instead of Praising.)

Kids who are lucky enough to experience unconditional love and acceptance develop stable internal happiness early (maybe by ten or twelve). Setbacks from the outside world -- lost ball games, a flubbed test, even a family move that leaves friends behind -- throw them for much briefer times than other kids, and they return more quickly to their normal happy state. But that's only true for a handful of lucky people. Many of us don't reach this state until our twenties, others work our whole lives to get there. Your child, who is lucky enough to have a parent who thinks about these issues, probably already has a good start, regardless of his innate disposition.

The reason it matters to unconditionally love our kids and appreciate who they are is that it helps them to accept and appreciate themselves. In addition to conferring happiness and the ability to love others, that gives children the resilience to pursue their goals and meet their needs, which confers greater self-esteem (and happiness). Which brings us to:

Step Two: Confidence

As a child grows, he needs to experience himself as capable of meeting his needs and successfully pursuing his goals.

Self Esteem begins with unconditional love, which of course has nothing to do with accomplishment. It helps the child develop the stable internal happiness that will help him meet his needs and accomplish his goals.

All of us have intrinsic value as human beings, not because of what we accomplish, but merely because of who we are. But who are we? Who we are can only be perceived by what we do, how we interact with our environment. And all humans find themselves tested by their environments, all of us have

tasks to master throughout our lives, growth that is demanded of us, practice and training and hurdles and tests. That is what shapes who we are, what brings our selves into expression.

So secondary self esteem comes from the confidence of knowing, deep inside, that we can take care of ourselves and meet our needs. That we have what it takes to bring our dreams into reality. So self esteem starts with feeling loved, because only kids who feel completely loved are able to tackle and master hard things. But self esteem does require the person to feel they can take care of themselves and achieve their desires.

And that, of course, means tackling things that are hard. Which means, as parents, encouraging our children to do some hard things. BUT--and this is essential-- this is about the child pursuing his own goals. (*"Dad really supports me to work hard at my soccer because he knows it's important to me."*) It isn't about our making the child work hard at goals that we've set. That shades into conditional love. (*"Dad loves me more if I score a goal."*)

So this doesn't mean pushing your child inappropriately, which we might call Tiger Parenting (which makes kids worry that they aren't good enough). It certainly doesn't mean rescuing or doing it for them, which we might call Helicoptering, or moving all obstacles out of their way, which we might call Snowplow Parenting, because both of these approaches rob the child of opportunities to develop confidence in their own capability.

Parenting for high self esteem means stepping back, paying attention, and giving your child targeted support to develop his own competence, and his own feelings of being capable and powerful.

Children who are able to apply themselves in pursuit of a goal are developing what we call Mastery. For more on how to help kids develop Mastery, you may want to check out my book *Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids: How to Stop Yelling and Start Connecting*. Chapter 5, *Raising a Child Who Achieves with Joy and Self- Esteem: Mastery Coaching*, gives you the hands-on tools you need to give your child the best start in developing self esteem and mastery.

For additional reading, see *4 Easy Habits to Build Your Child's Self Esteem with Your Words*.